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ABSTRACT

The misuse of evaluation is discussed. Boundaries of misutilization are not well understood, and distinctions between misutilization and non-use or abuse are not clear. In general, the responsibility for evaluation misuse is with the user, while the responsibility for misevaluation is with the evaluator. A distinction is also needed between intentional and unintentional misuse. Misuse of evaluation may be further defined as misuse of commissioning the evaluation, misuse of the evaluation process, and misuse of the findings. A more precise definition will refine the nature of misutilization in order to estimate how often it occurs. (SLD)

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Thoughts on Evaluation Misutilization

(and Associated Topics)*

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Considerable attention has been focused in recent years on the issue of evaluation utilization. Although only a few were discussing utilization in the 1970's, it has become the "hot" topic of the late 1980's. Indeed, last October, evaluation utilization was the theme of the most recent meeting of the American Evaluation Association in Boston.

The attempts during the late 1960's at distinguishing between "evaluation" and "research" activities is, in part, responsible for establishing an appropriate context for the consideration of evaluation utilization. As Carol Weiss noted:

> The basic rationale for evaluation is that it provides information for action. Its primary justification is that it contributes to the rationalization of decision making....unless it gains serious hearing when program decisions are made, it fails in its major purpose (1966).

Prior to the "action" emphasis in evaluation, there was very little attention to whether evaluation made a difference. The redefinition of evaluation as information for action or decision making highlighted the deficiencies of evaluation practice at that time. A variety of publications attested to the "underutilization" (if not downright impracticality and unimportance) of evaluation. For example, Rippey noted:

> At the moment there seems to be no indication that evaluation, although the law of the land, contributes anything to educational practice, other than headaches for the researcher, threats for the innovators and depressing articles for journals devoted to evaluation (Rippey, 1973, pg.9).

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As a result of these concerns for the inadequacies of evaluation, a number of researchers began the systematic study of conditions associated with the utilization of evaluation results. Studies of evaluation utilization (Patton, et.al, 1978; Alkin, Daillak & White, 1979; Daillak, Alkin, Stecher, 1981; Braskamp, Brown and Newman, 1978; King, Thompson and Pechman, 1982) have amplified the research domain and provided a multitude of insights regarding the conditions of evaluation use. Furthermore, a number of literature reviews have adequately summarized the factors that affect utilization and the research related to such relationships. (See Leviton & Hughes, 1981; Hansen, Martin & Oxford, 1981; and Alkin, 1985.)

Evaluation Misuse

While we know a great deal about how to increase the potential for utilization, we know very little about misuse and abuse of evaluation, and how to prevent it. The notion of misutilization is certainly not a recent phenomenon, however. In 1973, Mushkin warned that "evaluators have not sufficiently safeguarded their statements from misinterpretation" (p.34). In 1977, Cook and Pollard discussed four studies in which aspects of misutilization were identified. Later, Weiss and Bucuvalas (1980) stated that "sometimes decision makers misuse research" (p.11). More recently, in February 1985, a group of ten evaluation professionals attended an informal session at the "UCLA Malibu Conference Center." The session focused primarily on evaluation utilization, however, a portion of the dialogue that took place during the meeting touched upon the topic of misutilization (see Alkin, 1988).

Despite the fact that there has been some talk about misutilization, its boundaries are not very well understood. Patton (1988) noted at the Malibu meeting, "we really don't know much about the dimensions of it [misutilization] or how it occurs" (p.165). Others at that meeting (Ross Conner, Ernest House, Mike Kean, Jean King, Susan Klein,

Alex Law, Milbrey McLaughlin, Carol Weiss and the first author of this paper) noted the need for further study.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight some potential issues surrounding the concept of misutilization and some distinctions between the term misuse (or misutilization) and other related concepts--such as non-use and abuse. Potential examples of misutilization will be presented, and several categories or major types of misutilization will be proposed.

Defining Misutilization

First, it will be helpful to clarify, to the extent possible, the relationship between utilization and misutilization. Patton (1988) contends that these two concepts are separate dimensions. "One dimension is a continuum from nonutilization to utilization. A second continuum is nonmisutilization to misutilization" (p.336). Given this distinction, it follows that actions such as shelving evaluation reports might be exemplary of non-use, but not necessarily misuse.

What, then, is misutilization? This question is not easily answered. Even though researchers seem to agree that misuse of evaluation occurs (e.g., Mushkin, 1973; Cook and Pollard, 1977; Weiss and Bucuvalas, 1980; Patton, 1988), there does not yet exist a consensual definition of misutilization. Arriving at and justifying such a definition is not as simple as it may appear.

For example, consider a case in which an administrator blatantly squashes several negative evaluation reports to prevent the results from reaching the general public. On the surface, such an action appears to be a prime case of misutilization. Now, consider that same action (i.e., suppressing negative reports) in a situation where the reports were invalid due to poor data collection. Many researchers (e.g., King, 1982) consider intentional non-use of poorly conducted evaluations as responsible and appropriate action. Thus, misutilization in one situation may be conceived of as appropriate non-use in another.

One possible definition of misutilization could be the intentional (and even malicious) manipulation of some aspect of an evaluation (evaluative results, for example) in order to gain something--position or support, for instance. There are, of course, many other potential ways to define misuse. Before a consensual definition of misutilization can be reached, however, some value-based criteria need to be established.

A related issue to the problem of defining misuse is that of determining who bears the responsibility for misuse. If Mushkin (1973) is correct in stating that evaluators have not taken the necessary steps to protect their statements from misinterpretation, are evaluators at fault for misuse? Or, does the responsibility rest with users of evaluations? Perhaps, as Cook and Pollard (1977) contend, both evaluators and users contribute to the misutilization of evaluations.

In some instances, seeming misuse is really attributable to the evaluator. A poor report or failure to be sufficiently sensitive to users' information needs as well as their abilities to interpret data are two such examples. Additionally, the use of inappropriate methodologies, such as utilizing flawed data collection techniques or failing to identify qualifications of findings, is reflective of bad practice (much like malpractice in the field of medicine). For clarity, we contend that malpractice by evaluators should be referred to as instances of misevaluation rather than misutilization. Generally, when we allude to misuse, the focus is on users rather than evaluators because users are more attuned to the political ramifications of certain types of evaluations (and results), and have a greater stake in how such results are perceived. Thus, users, we believe, are more likely than evaluators to intentionally manipulate some part of an evaluation (e.g., the conclusions).

Undoubtedly, there will be borderline situations that might be viewed as either misuse or misevaluation (e.g., when an evaluator succumbs to pressures to alter conclusions in a report). But, on the whole, we define the responsibility for evaluation

misuse as resting with users, while the responsibility for misevaluation lies with evaluators.

Another issue related to misuse is the difference between intentional and unintentional misuse, and the role of each in the overall problem. Patton (at the Malibu meeting) addressed this issue briefly. He recognizes the distinction between these two types of misuse, and contended that unintentional misuse may be less of a problem because "unintentional misuse can be corrected through the processes aimed at increasing appropriate and proper use" (p. 336). In short, educating potential users about the nature of evaluation and sensitizing them to appropriate modes of evaluation use can be beneficial. Alkin's A Guide for Evaluation Decision Makers (1985) is designed to serve precisely that purpose.

Even though the distinction between "intentional" and "unintentional" misuse seems to be an important one, not all researchers have made such a separation. The views of Cook and Pollard (1977) are illustrative of this point. These researchers contend that publicly ascribing findings that differ from those in a final evaluation report is a type of misutilization. This is an easily accepted point of view. On the other hand, Cook and Pollard also believe that "misutilization is involved when the findings in the report are accepted uncritically, though nearly all competent methodologists would have ascribed less validity to them than the users did" (p.161).

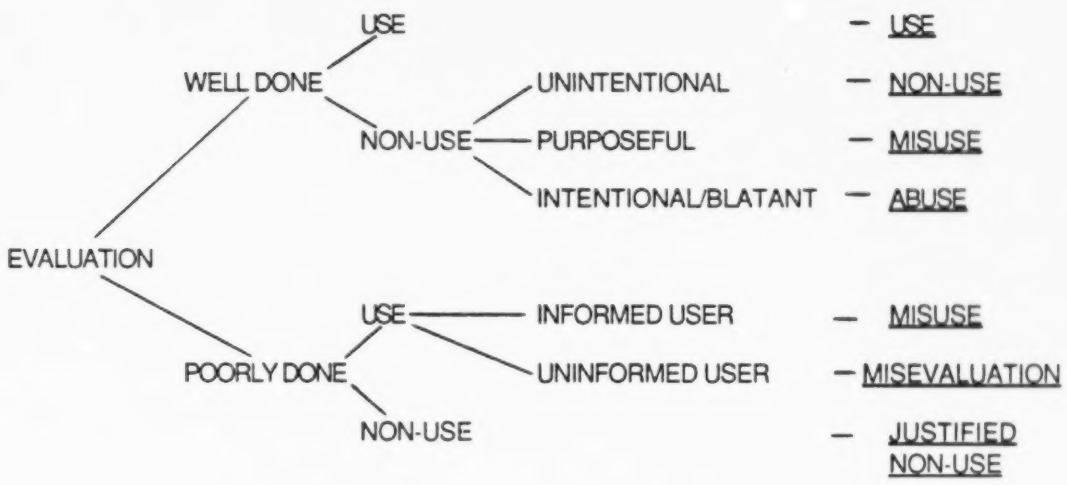
These two examples of misuse seem to us to differ considerably. In our view, lumping the two kinds of misuse in a single category is questionable. In the first case, the misusers are more likely to be cognizant of the inappropriateness of their actions, given that they have a written document against which to compare their public statements. This instance of intentional evaluation misuse we would refer to as evaluation abuse. In the second case, however, the misusers could easily be acting out of ignorance. Accusing users who lack methodological sophistication of misuse is debatable.

One might even contend that misuse resulting from users' lack of knowledge is, in actuality, a type of misevaluation--as we previously noted.

The various relationships just discussed are summarized in Figure 1 below. Note that we have distinguished between properly done and poorly done evaluations, between use and non-use, the users' intents, and the extent to which users are informed. This leads to a classification system yielding situations of use, non-use, misuse, abuse, and misevaluation.

Figure 1

EVALUATION USE RELATIONSHIPS: SOME PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS



Further Examples from the Literature

Our examination of the evaluation utilization literature presents numerous examples of situations which help to define "misuse" and associated terms. Two reputed instances of misuse that are found in the literature we believe are instead instances of misevaluation. These are: 1) when the evaluator fails to communicate results to all

users or 2) when the evaluator succumbs to bureaucratic pressures to produce certain kinds of results.

To facilitate further thinking on the topic of misutilization, it may be helpful to identify major categories of misuse based on cases of misuse cited in the literature thus far. Currently, it seems plausible to separate misuse into three categories:

(1) misuse of commissioning an evaluation,

(2) misuse of the evaluation process, and

(3) misuse of evaluative findings.

Basically, these categories reflect the general stages of evaluation during which misutilization may occur. Figure 2 categorizes examples of misutilization based on the above scheme. Note that these may be instances of misuse or abuse depending upon the intent of the user. Differences associated with user-intent were depicted in the prior Figure 1.

The difficulties in classifying instances as either non-use, misuse, abuse, etc. are demonstrated in Figure 3, which presents several borderline cases. The first two of these we would consider as questionable cases of misuse. If the action taken was due to user lack of competence the evaluator may share some of the fault. The third example we would consider a possible instance of misuse depending upon the intent of the user and the extent to which the selected evidence (or verbage) is non-representative of the report as a whole. Likewise, the fourth and fifth examples are dependent upon user intent and the quality of the evaluation. One could hardly call the non-use in number five "misuse" if the quality of the evaluation was poor.

Figure 2

CATEGORIES OF MISUSE/ABUSE *

A. Misuse of Commissioning the Evaluation

- o Commissioning evaluation for symbolic reasons (e.g., for political gain only, for publicity only, to gain funding only) (Weiss,1973)

B. Misuse of the Evaluation Process

- o Using evaluations to delay action (Weiss, 1973)
- o Using evaluations to avoid taking responsibility (Weiss, 1973)

C. Misuse of the Evaluation Findings

- o Changing the wording of evaluative conclusions (House 1988)
- o Selectively reporting results (House, 1988; Weiss & Bucuvalas, 1980)
- o Blatant non-use (of sound evaluations) (Patton, 1988)
- o Ascribing findings to a study that differ from the actual results (Cook & Pollard, 1977)
- o Inaccurate transmission of results (adapted from Weiss, 1972)
- o Oversimplifying findings (Weiss & Bucuvalas, 1980)
- o Dispensing with essential qualifications (Weiss & Bucuvalas, 1980)

* Depending upon the intent of the user.

Figure 3

BORDERLINE CASES OF MISUTILIZATION

1. Accepting findings uncritically, even though nearly all "competent" methodologists would have ascribed less validity to the findings than would users.
2. Using results from methodologically flawed studies.
3. Selecting paragraphs or sentences from results of an evaluation without representing the entire picture.
4. Releasing results prematurely.
5. Shelving the evaluation findings to reduce the likelihood of utilization of results.

Next Steps

Clearly, there are many unanswered questions regarding the concept of misutilization. This paper has touched but a few of the complexities surrounding this problem. The topic of misutilization has not been systematically explored. Clearly, a more precise definition is required.

One approach to studying misutilization might be to create a list of potential examples of misuse (some based on the literature and others contributed) and examine the extent of consensus among prominent evaluators. Such data could be supplemented with the misutilization-related perceptions of the people in the field (i.e., users and other practitioners). Collectively, this type of information would enable us to begin to refine the nature of misutilization and to estimate the extent of its occurrence.

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